



Notebook

Nomads who've earned a home

John Walsh



It's ironic that what has annoyed Basildon Council about the 80-odd Irish Traveller families, who today face eviction from the Dale Farm site in Essex, is that they don't actually travel anywhere. For a collection of nomads who call themselves, in Gaelic, *Lucht Siúil* – "the walking people" – they seem surprisingly static.

They used to be called tinkers or knackers because of the work they did – mending tin kettles and pans, buying and slaughtering old horses for the knacker's yard – and, decades ago, they constantly roamed around in horse-drawn caravans. My father, an Irish doctor, used to tell how he was summoned one night from Galway Hospital (where he worked as a young registrar) by a traveller with an extra horse, on which he was obliged to ride five miles to an encampment of caravans by the roadside. Inside the largest caravan, he found a dozen tinkers, their faces lit by the light of a hurricane lamp, kneeling by the bedside of a huge, bearded, self-proclaimed "King of the Tinkers", who had convinced himself he was dying – though he was, in fact, suffering from a painfully burst abscess in the nether regions.

Anyway, during and after the 1960s, the caravans gave way to better-equipped mobile homes, the tinkers became known as "itinerants" in Ireland and "travellers" over here – and, in what seemed a final dereliction of their earthy origins, they started to put down roots. Eighty families now live on 52 plots of land in the Dale Farm site, in a mixture of caravans and houses. The caravans have, as far as I can make out, every right to be there because they're motor vehicles and the travellers own the land they're parked on. But when they started building actual homes, with actual bricks and plaster, the council could turn against them; they could say the site was a green belt area and that the travellers didn't have planning permission to build anything.

I find my sympathies divided about this matter. I'm rather moved by Vanessa Redgrave's insistence on the warmth and strength, wisdom

and gentleness of the travellers' community, but she loses me when she says: "Our communities up and down the country have been decimated [sic] and destroyed. Dale Farm hasn't."

Dale Farm has been home to a community of deracinated folk from Rathkeale, Co Limerick for 10 years. It's not as if we're talking about an ancient Berkshire village under threat of extinction. And I'm puzzled by one of the travellers who predicted, of the council, "they want to crush this community, destroy our culture and put us into houses". But of course, many of the travellers are already in houses that they built themselves; that's where the trouble started; that's why the council is able to threaten them with eviction.

One comes down, though, in the end, on the travellers' side. You just have to listen to the bellyaching of local property developers about the awfulness of having (my dear) travellers on one's doorstep; you just have to hear that phrase "green belt" being bandied around (it means "let's keep the riff-raff out of town and keep houses prices high in town"); you just have to recall how much the travellers have been given mixed signals by local and central government for a whole decade (Basildon Council has been trying to evict them from the start; John Prescott, when he was deputy PM, gave them permission to stay for two years) to feel the nomads have perhaps earned a home at last in the Essex suburbs, if that's really where you want to end up.

Mystical allure of the Speaking Clock

What is it about the words "At the third stroke..." that so beguiles and delights council workers in north-east England? They seem to have developed a bit of a fetish about them. A Freedom of Information request has elicited the information that five councils, including Norwich and Durham, spent a total of £2,500 last year on ringing the Speaking Clock. They spent a



Traveller girls Vivian and Beverly at Dale Farm in Basildon. Problems started for the community when they started building permanent homes on the site GETTY IMAGES

great deal more ringing directory enquiries and premium line phone numbers, but it's the Speaking Clock expenditure that stands out. It's true the lady who tells you that "the time, from BT, is ten twenty-oooo..." has a uniquely amused and charming voice, but that cannot be the only reason for the clock's popularity. What ghastly *weltschmerz* or terminal ennui has so enveloped Durham City staff that they need to check the time every five minutes (at 31p a pop)? Are they so keen to leave on the dot of 5pm? Couldn't they ask the person sitting next to them? Couldn't they consult the clock on their iPhone, like teenagers do these days? Couldn't they – and this surely is the clincher – check their wrist-watch? Or are they waiting for the brass carriage-clock that comes with retirement?

A dose of something unlovely

Do you ever see an advertisement that really turns your head? I recently did, and not in a

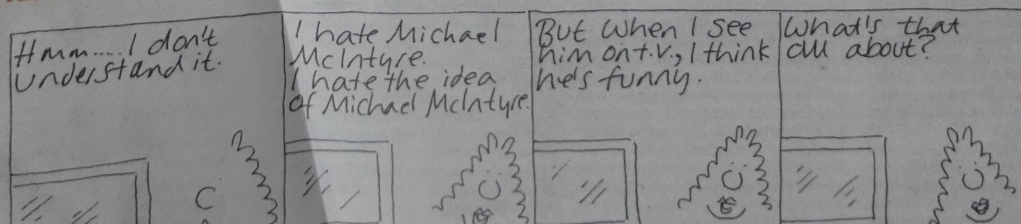
good way. I nearly crashed the motor while driving past a bus-stop hoarding that featured the new fragrance from Diesel.

It showed a tempestuous-looking naked woman clutching to herself a giant, heart-shaped bottle of pink perfume. It was called Loverdose.

Who in the name of God's holy trousers thought that a good name for a perfume? What marketing department brainstorm produced that misbegotten collection of syllables? But wait, here are the product notes: "Loverdose ... represents a woman who is sexy, playful and irresistible. She receives an overdose of love from those around her, but she wants more. She desires pleasure, adrenaline and passion."

Oh I get it, it's an overdose of love, do you see? Although, when you see the word, you don't pronounce it "Loaver-dose" do you? You'd say "Love-a-dose" as in the phrase, "Would you love a dose of the clap?" The marketing people go on to tell us that the Loverdose bottle "represents a beautiful but deadly weapon of seduction". I think I'll pass, thanks.

> AS IF... > Sally Ann Lasson >



> DAYS LIKE THESE >

1 SEPTEMBER 1939 PRIME MINISTER NEVILLE CHAMBERLAIN speaks to the House of Commons just hours after Hitler's troops invade Poland: "I do not propose to say many words tonight. The time has come when action rather than speech is required. Eighteen months ago in this House I prayed that the responsibility might not fall upon me to ask this country to accept the awful arbitrament of war. I fear that I may not be able to avoid that responsibility."